Democracy and the Left

Andy Gillitz, Sebastian, George Shulman, and Grayson Walker

On September 10, 2024, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted a panel discussion on democracy and the Left at New York University. The panelists were Sebastian (Revolutionary Communists of America[1]), George Shulman (professor emeritus at NYU, whose work focuses on the relationship of race, political culture, and literature in post-war American life), Grayson Walker (co-founder of the Infrared Collective and the American Communist Party[2]), and Andy Gittlitz (author of I Want to Believe: Posadism, UFOs and Apocalypse Communism *(2020) and co-host of the Antifada podcast). An edited transcript follows.*[3]

Sebastian: When we talk about democracy, we're not talking about democracy in the abstract, we're talking about bourgeois democracy: democracy under capitalism. This is a system of class rule. The working class has voting rights, but these only go so far. On top of undemocratic rules and institutions like the Supreme Court and Electoral College, the working class is barred from active participation in democracy just by their living conditions. The working day leaves people physically and mentally exhausted. To the degree that people do vote, every few years they get to choose which representatives of the capitalist class they prefer to represent them.[4]

Look at the growing unpopularity of what Israel is doing in Gaza: majority disapproval since at least March. A worldwide mass movement and polls showing that this issue will potentially cost the Democrats the Muslim vote in states like Michigan have not been enough to cause either party to change tune. Under both parties, life has gotten worse while the rich have gotten richer, and the banks were bailed out with the tax dollars of the working class. This is what is responsible for creating Trump on the Right, as well as Sanders on the Left — both appealing to huge layers of the working class.

Sanders, despite raising the hopes of a generation, led his movement twice into the dead end of the Democratic Party. With no working-class option on the Left, decades of built-up anger were channeled to the Right with Trump. We've seen the same thing around the world: Left leaders calling for reforms, finding themselves blocked, and usually capitulating to the liberals. Jeremy Corbyn in Britain in 2019, Podemos in Spain, SYRIZA in Greece in 2015, and we may be seeing that with Melenchon in France right now. On the Right, populists tap into this overwhelming anger and misdirect it against immigrants, the LGBT, etc. Boris Johnson in the U.K., Marine Le Pen in France, Javier Milei in Argentina, the AfD[5] in Germany, and Trump aren't appearing because fascism is impending or because democracy is doomed; they are responding to a collapse of the liberal Center, unable to offer any stable standard of living for working-class people anywhere in the world. The Right is able to tap into this anger because the Left has failed to. The way to defeat the Right is to create an alternative for the working class that can offer real explanations and a real way to fight back.

Regardless of what we think about it, the working class attempts to use democratic rights for better conditions and for reforms, but this system is designed to prevent them from fundamentally changing anything. This is a lesson the working class has learned before and is learning today — we want to accelerate class consciousness, not reinforce illusions in the system. The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and people like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tarred the label "socialist" through their association with the Democrats, playing into the Republican red-baiting, painting people like Kamala Harris as communists. Are we any closer to the Green New Deal or Medicare-for-All than when they first came onto the scene? The working class of this country has won the most important reforms of the last century on the backs of militant unions: the eight-hour workday, Social Security and the right to retire, workplace benefits, and basic workplace-safety laws. But no right or reform is safe as long as capitalism continues to exist.

The Revolutionary Communists of America (RCA) brings communist ideas into every union, workplace, school, and campus, using the lessons of history and past movements to put forward the most effective tactics in every struggle. That is the role of Marxist theory and Marxists in the movement. We want to build a revolutionary party that can use the rigged system of democracy under capitalism as one tool at our disposal to win the support of the working class, with the aim of overthrowing capitalism entirely. We want to replace the illusion of democracy with real workers' democracy — a system where the overwhelming majority really make the decisions and run society.

George Shulman: You sound a lot like I did 40 years ago. I'm going to speak as a political theorist, not as the Marxist I once was.

Democracy has never existed universally. Every regime professing to be a democracy has set up rules, restricting democratic rights to the propertied or aristocrats, men rather than women, and whites rather than people of various colors. In the last 200 years — since Marx — formal democracy has been expanded. That formal expansion is a kind of illusion because there's substantive, daily inequality that continues, and the freedom of some is conditioned on the exploitation or domination of others. Marx wanted to make formal equality substantive, to establish social relations that were genuinely reciprocal among people who recognized their mutual dependence.

I want to talk about American exceptionalism, which was an idea invented by socialists and Marxists in the 1930s to explain why they were having so much trouble in the U.S.[6] The entire constitutional system is oriented to protect property, capital, and whites. I've learned over the last 40 years that the so-called "working class" is thoroughly racist. The real "working class" in this country is women and people of color, but most Marxism still thinks about the whites who voted for Bernie. The Left has never come to terms with race. American politics is stuck.

In reaction to black, feminist, and queer struggles since the 50s, 45% of the country is now committed to defending racial and gendered hierarchy, some large percentage being working people who don't have college educations. It's not misdirected anger; they are invested in racial and gender domination. You can't explain Trump by a thesis of de-industrialization, austerity, and suffering. Since Nixon, with a few burps on the way to Ronald Reagan, a mass majority have taken blacks and women's alignment with the state to be at the expense of white men.

Trump does not accept the central premise of a democratic politics: the peaceful transfer of power. If you can't accept losing an election, then you are in a different political game. Republicans, as bad as they were, maintained the formality of democracy. I imagine myself asking, does the Left really need formal democracy? We're in what Gramsci called an interregnum,[7] a period in which old gods are dying and new ones are born. Gramsci thought socialism was the new god, and capitalism was the old one. It's not clear to me which god is dying. We're in a Weimar Republic moment. If people don't vote for Harris, it will be the last election that we have.

I started as someone who would never vote for Hubert Humphrey,[8] because he was an imperialist and a capitalist. By not voting for Humphrey, I elected Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, who did enormous damage to the fabric of society and actual people. The differences between the parties may not seem so great, but in terms of food stamps, healthcare, treatment by police — they matter. Even if it's formal, the democratic space needs to be kept open so we're not put in jail. We require that space to be left, or kept, open as a condition of doing our work: creating radical social movements.

Grayson Walker: Marxism isn't a veil of tears by which all cosmic injustices are rectified.[9] It's not about every form of oppression in the abstract; it's a language that the working class uses to articulate its actually existing class struggle. Democracy is something that the workers' movement can find expression in and will to wither away. This process that Lenin describes in *State and Revolution* (1917) involves the reduction of the state to its bare-minimum function so that it may oversee the development of the forces of production as rapidly as possible and safeguard the rule of the proletarian class against the ossified, formalistic procedures of bourgeois democracy that strangle authentic forms of proletarian organization such as the soviets.

This is different from what political pundits usually mean by democracy, referring to little more than the consensus of three-letter agencies, think-tanks, corporate media, and NGOs, who excuse every violation of democratic liberties "in defense of democracy." To paraphrase Stalin in his last speech, the bourgeois democracies are throwing overboard the democratic liberties that they previously were for, that the working class fought and died for.[10] Democracy is indeed oppressive and hostile to working-class politics — if we mean liberal democracy. The ruling class in America destroys even the formal liberties of the Constitution, which gives us the same breathing room that the professor wisely talks about. We need to preserve this breathing room, but it is being destroyed by the same institutions that are rallying us behind "democracy" against the "fascist threat."

For Lenin and Marxists historically, democracy has more in common with what we call populism than it does liberal democracy. Marxists are talking not about the proceduralism of bourgeois liberalism, but Mao going to the countryside and rallying the people against these things. The democratic struggle means supporting popular forms of sovereignty that can give expression to the interests of the working class and the masses. In this sense, Marxists are defenders of bourgeois freedoms. This puts them on the side of defending the Constitution, of defending the basic rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights, against the security state: the unelected, unaccountable agencies — formed historically to oppose communists — which MAGA calls the deep state.

The "MAGA Communist" meme that Infrared coined was about this specifically. It's not Right-wing tailism; it recognizes what the professor said: we are waging a different form of struggle. Trump — MAGA — is not playing by the basic rules that have governed democracy previously. But that should be a given for Marxists. MAGA allowed for the articulation of an independent politics outside the Republican–Democratic divide. We can win over and direct this anger and discontent with liberal-democratic forms in a way that is historically progressive. The Bolshevik Party engaged in electoral politics, but they also were outside of it. They recognized that you have to build dual power, soviet power, which they

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About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s–30s), "New" (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open a language that the working class uses to articulate its actually existing class struggle. Democracy is something that the workers' movement can find expression in and will to wither away. This process that Lenin describes in *State and Revolution* (1917) involves the reduction of the state to its bare-minimum function so that it may oversee the development of the forces of production as rapidly as possible and safeguard the rule of the proletarian class against the ossified, formalistic procedures of bourgeois democracy that strangle authentic forms of proletarian organization such as the soviets.

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Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

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Bernie Sanders, *Chapo Trap House*, and socialism's "chore to be done"

A review of Amber A'Lee Frost's *Dirtbag*

Michael McClelland

Amber A'Lee Frost, *Dirtbag: Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2023).

"THIS BOOK IS ABOUT failure and defeat." It seems whether writer, activist, and podcast host Amber A'Lee Frost's new memoir, *Dirtbag*, will stir lively curiosity or morbid fascination will depend on the reader. Those prone to wisecracks will revel in the deluges of "shade" dripping from each page; it has *Chapo Trap House*, the irreverent Left podcast the author co-hosts, written all over it. Like *Chapo* — Patreon's most popular podcast until 2020 and which remains in the platform's top 10[1] — Frost's rise to prominence coincided with the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign, with Frost endorsing Sanders on the podcast and in the pages of *Jacobin*.

Described in the publisher's blurb as "the complete story of the victories and failures of millennial socialism, as told by the writer who witnessed it all firsthand," *Dirtbag*, published in late 2023, is one of the Millennial Left's few book-length treatments. Frost is a proponent of the proverbial "ordinary American," and her book complements the *Chapo* brand by skewering pundits and activists alike who deflect from, undermine, or scoff at every organizer's call to "meet workers where they're at." Frost's pro-worker stance, as she explains, solidified early on via her activism in Working Families Party (WFP), Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), and other groups during the 2000s and 2010s;[2] decades when upsurges in progressive activism reflected deeper crises within the Democratic Party and mainstream politics generally. *Dirtbag* attempts to deal with these crises via an on-the-ground account. "I wrote this book," Frost writes, "because I was there."

One chapter in *Dirtbag*, for instance, is devoted to Occupy Wall Street. Frost, who attended the protests at Zuccotti Park, acknowledges the movement's initial verve. However, she notes that despite discontents still boiling from the 2008 Global Financial Crash, the movement was sapped by attention-seeking anarchists pushing for interminable processes-for-processes'-sake (like, for instance, daily meetings called "general assemblies," in which emerging spokespersons, called "figureheads" instead of "leaders," tended to be ejected as quickly as they came to fill their seats). Frost's dismal assessment of Occupy sets the tone for her retelling of other generation-defining eruptions on the Millennial Left, some of which are mentioned only in passing on account of their perceived impotence. The anti-Iraq War movement had little effect, she notes, since the U.S. invasion "surged on regardless of popular will." Nor do events at the Millennial Left's crescendo — BLM, Trump's election, COVID-19, etc. — receive many references.

Most surprising, however, is the absence of Bernie Sanders in *Dirtbag*. Given Frost's association with DSA and *Jacobin*, one would expect a book-length postmortem on Sanders's 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. Sanders's significance for the Millennial Left is assumed but rarely discussed — other than in one chapter, a reprint of Frost's 2019 article for *The Baffler* praising Sanders, titled "It's Bernie, Bitch."[3] Little sustained discussion occurs with respect to Frost's experiences during the campaign period, such as her canvassing for Sanders in Iowa and touring to the Democratic primary cities with Chapo, and there are even fewer words on its gloomy aftermath (which coincided with two Chapo co-hosts, Virgil Texas and Matt Christman, going off the radar for different reasons and in different ways). Instead, at the climax of the book, after the 2020 caucuses, Frost simply truncates events as follows: "We flew home, and I was as happy and exhausted as I've ever been. Then more people got sick. Then Bernie conceded to Biden. Then we stayed inside." Presumably, Frost wants to let the point hang in the air for her readers. That, or she is hesitating; an indication that she can no longer expect her readers to believe in a dead metaphor like Sanders. Assuming it was "Bernie, bitch," one might ask what exactly "it" was, and where it has gone.

The absence of Bernie Sanders

So far, wherever Sanders's image has stood in for dashed hopes, it has been in an incomplete, ill-fitting way. Just as 1990s Vietnam and Civil Rights movies regurgitated a pre-packaged memory of the New Left, younger Leftists — many of whom were not even pubescent in 2016 — inherit only a flattened picture of the Millennial Left, reduced to Sanders and Trump. But there was also Corbyn and Momentum, Syriza, Podemos, Chile's *estallido social*,[4] Australia's Victorian Socialists, the election of Elke Kahr as the "communist" mayor of Graz, Austria, and countless other developments that shaped a generation's political self-understanding. In writing her book, Frost faced an opportunity to correct mistaken accounts, dealing with the 2010s in a way that confronts the era's missed opportunities instead of memory-holing them. If the forces driving the Millennial Left seemed too obvious to state at the time, they will not remain so for long: the window for an innocent account, untouched by the catchphrases, ready-made answers, and thought-terminating clichés that come with time, is closing.

The autobiographical form provides an apt avenue for reckoning. "Bernie Sanders," Frost writes, "was the biggest opportunity of my lifetime so far, and he may remain so until the end. . . . As a socialist, he was an outsider, but his politics were inclusive yet populist, and his campaigns did not resent, fear, patronize, or hold contempt for squares, normies, or whatever you call them, which is why he had the edge, with a diverse and largely un-edgy electorate."

Frost saw Sanders's undoing in real time, mere weeks after she joined her *Chapo* co-hosts on stage in his honor in early 2020. They had been on tour, witnessing Bernie's unprecedented successes ahead of his opponents in the Democratic Party primaries; they celebrated with a passionate rendition of "Solidarity Forever" at the end of each show. Yet, it became clear during the Nevada caucus that despite Sanders's popularity, he would not gain the nomination — he was, in Frost's words, to be "repeatedly sabotaged by the resentful and devious right wing of his own party."[5] Unfortunately, this summary proves to be the fullest extent of her reckoning with Sanders, concluding that although he made "some 'stupid mistakes'" — a reference to Hunter S. Thompson's postmortem of George McGovern's loss in the 1972 election[6] — "he didn't betray us or royally fuck up as a result of his own hubris. Bernie was defeated."

Considering this appraisal, and recalling Frost's disclaimer that her book chronicles "failure and defeat," the reader might question the very distinction. When Frost calls the Sanders campaign a defeat, she separates it from failure, and failure from defeat, presupposing a dichotomy that guides her recollections and gives the reader a framework for judging them. "Failure," Frost reasoned on *Chapo* soon after Sanders's loss, "implies there was something you could have done."[7] Frost's reasoning is that the difference between failure and defeat is agency: in failure, the agent, like a general watching over the battlefield, fails to take strategic responsibility, while defeat has more to do with external forces beyond one's awareness or control.

It is questionable whether this conception of politics is attached to a philosophy, or merely serves as a rhetorical and polemical convenience for the writer. Either way, it is based on a curious melding of virtue ethics and pragmatism that Frost expresses with stoical pride. Premised on winning, it is a fighter's mentality, and no wonder Frost seems to have picked it up from the picket line. This is where organizers locate their great white whale: the "natural leaders" who take up the megaphone and finally personify the collective, attaining to their status as a nucleus of willpower in the workplace or community. Although there can fall from the sky no *deus ex machina* to transform what Frost calls "defeat" into victory, strong protagonists like these can turn hardship into an occasion for reflection, preventing one mistake from leading to another. In Dirtbag, Frost exalts the character of Starbuck in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851): "A sober and sensible man, he believes that the ship is set for failure, but he is bound by honor and duty to proceed as if they are not."

This sentiment echoes the words of encouragement that Frost gave to a live audience — all Sanders supporters — during a *Chapo* tour stop in Iowa City for the 2020 caucuses: "What [socialists are] trying to do is build an institution. . . Some days you're going to be like, 'I don't know why I'm doing this at all.'" Continuing, she compared the "institution" of socialism to the building of a holy temple, aligning her cause with that of an ancient religion: "[You're] just going to keep going in case [you're] wrong . . . And it's going to take 300 years to build, and you're only going to live to be 45, and you're never going to see it finish. It doesn't matter. It didn't start with you. It won't end with you. You just do it. And you just hope that your part of it is important. And that has to be enough."[8]

Only upon accepting the terms of this fighter's gambit can one see that the problem lies in the entire paradigm. Frost proceeds from the faulty premise that Sanders and DSA were not already, from the very beginning, products of failure. Frost's quibbling with the definition of failure itself, likewise, functions as proof of this disavowal; it is an attempt at bargaining with history's already-settled accounts. That is, whether she calls it "failure" or "defeat," the question of whether Sanders could have won the 2020 election is a red herring. The real loss lay in his successes. Whereas, today, *Jacobin* celebrates the likes of Sanders and Mamdani having brought the word "socialism" back into the mainstream as a victory, this has only been the final act in the term's long hollowing out so it can be identified only with the advance guard of the Democratic Party. Indeed, the term has come to represent for the Millennial generation's progressive Democrats what the "grassroots" had for others before them, from George McGovern's supporters, to Jimmy Carter's, to Gary Hart's, to Howard Dean's, then finally to Obama's.

So, ahistorically framing the Sanders campaign as having been betrayed by the "resentful and devious right wing" of the Party is a prideful disavowal. It is like the boastful child who denies being conned out of his lunch money, insisting only that his generosity had been taken advantage of. Such is the logic of opportunism: when total loss can be broken down and itemized, it appears less as total loss and more as a banal list of expenditures. In this way, Frost's self-branding as a critic of the "new social movements" and the "professional managerial class" is ironic, since her identification with the working class, intended as a corrective, cannot escape the capitalist political paradigm these emerged from. However genuine a symptom her politics might be, her interests cannot stand apart from that of a campaign manager, with all the clichés of bases to be mobilized, policies to be championed, and optics to be handled.

If Sanders's losses were a "defeat" for social democracy and not proof of a deeper, historical absence, the recent "communist" turn among younger Leftists (i.e., toward neo-Maoism, neo-Stalinism and other, more eclectic flavors), reflects an unwillingness among adherents to share Frost's view that the difference matters. As far as today's younger neo-communists, schooled not on *Chapo* but Hasan Piker's streams, Infrared, Jackson Hinkle, and Grayzone are concerned — whose anger at Sanders's defense of Israel's "right to defend itself"[9] boiled over into attempts to push Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez to say the word "genocide" — Sanders remains the same career politician whose party loyalty obliged him to endorse the very establishment figures he ran against in 2016 and 2020.[10] Similarly, although the Democrats' progressive faction in Congress alongside Sanders — the "Squad" — has grown in number and influence since 2018, some of its members have softened their "radical" branding, with Ocasio-Cortez endorsing Biden and Harris, and wavering with respect to supporting pro-worker legislation.[11] As for Zohran Mamdani's recent mayoral win in New York City, even Frost's own peers are peeling away from DSA front lines, with Will Menaker voicing little optimism other than that the election offered him cathartic relief for a change.[12]

The last few years have yielded appraisals of the Millennial Left that are more full-throated than Frost's. Benjamin Studebaker, in *The Chronic Crisis of American Democracy* (2023), acknowledges his generation's inability to build a legacy of broad and lasting social reform.[13] He attributes activists' inability to connect with working-class voters to "the cultural tastes of professionals," reinforced by "new terms [activists] can use to remind themselves and others that they went to college." *Jacobin* commentator Steve Fraser, meanwhile, offers the critique that the Millennial Left's real defeat lay in its perpetual reinscription of efforts to "tweak," not transform capitalism.[14] Platypus's Chris Cutrone goes further, arguing in *The Death of the Millennial Left* (2023) that the 2010s saw the latest phase in a century-long forgetting of independent class politics,[15] emblematic of the crisis at once afflicting and reconstituting capitalist society as a whole.[16]

Frost might be aware of these appraisals, defending her generation's efforts by contending that it all depends on how one defines "politics." For Frost, an advocate of the everyman and his bread-and-butter issues, democratic socialism is more about democracy than socialist politics: "What I want — what I have always wanted — is nothing more or less than a relatively democratic workers' state that runs smoothly and fairly, one where enough injustice has been resolved that for the average person, 'politics' may be relegated to a minorly inconvenient aspect of civic responsibility, like taking out the trash." Early on in *Dirtbag*, she recalls growing up in a small town hollowed out by factory job cuts, where, at home, she was taught that "everyone deserves decent things [and] that fair is fair," absorbing her mother's conviction that "opposition to such basic morality and ethics is irrational and/or ignorant." This moral universe shapes her memoir and anchors her refrain that building socialism is simply a "chore that needs to be done."

But "fair is fair" presupposes unfairness. Equal right, as Marx argues in his "Critique of the Gotha Program" (1875), only exists on the basis of inequality.[17] Thus, democracy — the political response to unequal right — flowers on the soil of capitalism. Frost gets it backwards, mistaking effects for causes in treating adequate distribution — i.e., of resources and rights — as society's fundamental need, and capitalism as its obstacle. This is why Frost's emphasis on "a relatively democratic workers' state," along with the "chores" needed to build it, represents not a demand for "socialism," as she calls it, but the state under a new guise — to wit, capitalism by other means. As a critic of socialism, Marx would see Frost's "chore to be done" as an aptly symptomatic expression of her politics — a romantic and insufficient response to the forward-marching problem that is capitalism.

However much Frost likes to invoke Eugene Debs — as Mamdani did in his November 2025 victory speech — her version of "socialism" does not agree with the terms that were widely recognized in the historical international Marxist movement for socialism. For the radicals of the Second International, no image could have appeared more absurd than that of a "socialist state." Incomprehensible to them was the notion that the state, being the most sophisticated expression of society's self-domination, could serve as the precondition for freedom, except negatively through its abolition via the dictatorship of the proletariat. Or, as Marx scribbled incredulously in the Gotha critique: "Free state — what is this?"[18] A "free state" is a contradiction in terms.

The absence of *Chapo Trap House*

Beyond Sanders, DSA, and *Jacobin* readers will likely wonder why *Chapo Trap House*, the brand which largely gave Frost her standing as a commentator, hardly appears in *Dirtbag*. *Chapo* could not have gained such popularity in 2016 were it not for a seemingly intractable political status quo shaping the consciousness of American Millennials. In the preceding period that was characterized by bank bailouts, "forever wars," and congressional deadlocks, young people could not help but feel resigned to political dysfunction as the grim and inevitable state of affairs. During the Obama years, the "drone president's" erstwhile supporters became increasingly disaffected, directing their ire not only at Democratic Party politicians but all who hedged in lockstep. Consequently, not only did CNN and MSNBC continue to hemorrhage their youth audience to podcasts, but progressive comedians like Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert also began to read as relics of the Bush–Obama era. All the while, new independent media outlets who continued to express support for establishment Democrats, like *Pod Save America* and *Vox*, earned the scorn of politically literate Millennials. Many audience members defected, forming the fanbase of podcasts like *Trillbilly Worker's Party*, *Street Fight Radio*, and the kingpin, *Chapo*.[19] Indeed, *Chapo*'s outsider status would mirror Sanders's background as an independent, and as the podcast folded into his base of support, it became a product of, and a party to, his successes. The explosive laughter and tinny audio of early episodes captured a ramshackle, iconoclastic élan — it was, in subcultural terms, "punk."

Among Democrat-aligned media, *Chapo* raised hackles. The "Bernie bro" phenomenon, as it was termed, prompted liberal pundits to claw for any means to discredit the podcast and its listeners' refusal to play by the rules of political discourse. During Sanders's 2020 campaign, *The New York Times* and *Vox* published hit pieces[20] targeting *Chapo*'s listenership for their shock humor and below-the-belt antics — which included flooding the replies of Twitter threads posted by Democratic candidates with emojis mocking Bernie rivals Elizabeth Warren (the "snake") and Pete Buttigieg (the "rat"). Months later, *Chapo*'s subreddit was banned for alleged terms-of service violations, cementing a quasi-outlaw self-identification among listeners. In other words, establishment critiques of *Chapo* only galvanized support for the podcast — just like how Democrats' attempts to sabotage Sanders only rallied his hardcore supporters.

An unusual and formidable collection of *Jacobin*-devouring minds, the podcast became the Hydra of the Millennial Left: Matt Christman, the hardcore historian; Virgil Texas, the "policy wonk"; Felix Biederman, the podcast's Jonathan Swift figure; and Will Menaker, the shrewd editor's son. Frost, for her part, embodied the activist who, in her impassioned diatribes, synthesized the righteous fury of the group. Rejecting triumphalism, which, in *Dirtbag*, Frost calls a "psychosis," and pessimism ("childish" and "lazy because there's no fucking excuse"), Frost's contribution can be summarized via her conviction that even when one is convinced one is going to lose a fight, one ought to "fucking do it anyway."

This bullishness was as intimate to *Chapo*'s style as it is in Frost's writing. As the co-hosts saw it, critics bristled at *Chapo*'s vulgarity because it punctured the cocoon of decorum protecting establishment media's claim to legitimacy. This, of course, was the entire point and appeal of *Chapo*: the "fucks" and "shits" were not decorative trim, but rivets holding together the whole. "My point of view," Will Menaker said, "is that liberalism presents a certain set of manners that make a society closer to being a more polite, decent society. But at the end of the day these can't challenge power or change the essential meaninglessness at the heart of everything we feel and do."[21] (Indicative of this sentiment is an old *Chapo* flourish in which hosts would flabbergastedly address an imagined congressman as "sir!" — these dignitaries, the hosts implied, were no sirs.) Frost has described it more pointedly: "Civility is destructive because it perpetuates falsehoods, while vulgarity can keep us honest. . . . Vulgarity is the language of the people, and so it should be among the grammars of the left, just as it has been historically, to wield righteously against the corrupt and the powerful."[22]

Ironically, Frost's quasi-prefigurative rhetoric almost sounds like what, in a former era, belonged among anarchists at Occupy. Conventional morality, from the dirtbags' point of view, has always functioned as cover for the ruling class's interests, obstructing whatever spontaneously-arising co-operative morality might exist in their absence. Irreverence implies refusing the authority of some object of reverence; as *Chapo* saw it, the elites on both sides of the political aisle owed their salaries to keeping such cant on life support. All the sensible observer needed to do, the co-hosts intimated, was cut through the gordian knot — or, in layman's terms, the bullshit.

So, if the term "Bernie bro" offered establishment media a ready-made deflection from independent voices like *Chapo*'s, the term's complement, "dirtbag," had even more appeal for those on the receiving end of the barbs. *Chapo*'s roaring choruses of laughter — issuing from, in the case of one episode, Will Menaker gleefully sharing news of Nancy Pelosi's "90,000-year-old" husband receiving a DUI — defied a stubborn political reality presumed to be safeguarded by demonic "respectability." Leftists could exhale along with *Chapo*. It was safe to heckle.

It was not, however, new. It was an after-image; an unconscious inheritance from the Gen-X subculturalism *Chapo*'s co-hosts had been raised on. Tellingly, their influences included *The Howard Stern Show*, *Opie and Anthony*, and the "golden age" of *The Simpsons*; all brands that had appealed to an emerging audience whose ability to remain conscious of current affairs became a substitute for politics. Downstream from that perennial punk reflex of defying the "sell-outs,", the legacy of Gen-X has been to keep Millennials thrashing against the New Left counter-culture as though caught in a night terror. Yet, by criticizing the counter-culture, they have only sanctified it. (As Menaker — the son of *New York Times* and *New Yorker* editors — once admitted in an interview, "scratch the surface of a cynic and you'll find a romantic at heart."[23]) As had once been the case in the New Left era, and remained true for Generation X, the fiercest Democratic Party "outsiders" in the Millennial Left have not stood against doctrines per se; only their updating to keep pace with reality. And although *Chapo* should not be conflated with the progressive politicians they champion, it should not be dismissed that they, along with DSA and Jacobin, led the ground invasion in favor of this overhaul.

There was, therefore, little that distinguished *Chapo*'s "politics" beyond a cultivated style, and little that distinguished its style other than the posture those "politics" permitted. Hence why the "Bernie bro" epithet stuck: even the *Chapo* hosts will admit, like anyone who traversed an inner-city arts scene in the early 2010s, how few university-educated bohemians actually identified with socialism until it became edgy to do so. The moment seemed to spew out turtlenecked blowhards onto every street corner who, having traded *Pitchfork* and *Vice* for *Jacobin*, were suddenly overheard at parties holding forth about universal healthcare, "liveable cities," and the Green New Deal. That their avatar was an archly deadpan septuagenarian like Sanders was, in itself, delicious.

Chapo's co-hosts deserve some defense against being reduced to this archetype. Hipsterish as the podcast appeared, its ironic sensibility was less an affectation than a genuine symptom of generational fatigue. Here was a very peculiar set of ragged thirty-somethings — Frost had her rural midwestern upbringing, Menaker his lifelong exposure to the trappings of legacy media via his parents, and Christman a debilitating condition in his teenage years that sent him into a world of books. Their identification with Sanders, meanwhile, should be taken at face value: like him, these hotheaded outsiders caused an ignition when faced with the fumes of injustice; a feeling that *Dirtbag*, in its totality, invites. Indeed, in reaching its final chapter, one might entirely forget *Chapo*'s absence. The essence of the podcast is, after all, in Frost, who embodies the paradoxical admixture of Sanders's passion and the internet-addled sensibilities of her co-hosts. Her boisterousness is *Chapo* personified — a middle-ground between Will Menaker, who would often introduce an episode with a lump in

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The return of revolutionary politics

Historical lessons for today's Left

Nathan Richardson

THE GLOBAL POLITICAL CLIMATE of the 2020s is marked by the apparent resurgence of far-Right populism, particularly in the United States with the consolidation of the MAGA movement under Donald Trump. Yet beneath the surface, there are signs of a renewed interest in leftist traditions. Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism — ideologies long pronounced "dead" after 1989 — are finding new resonance among young people, especially as systemic crises of capitalism deepen and political polarization accelerates. While this phenomenon is still emergent and fragmented, it echoes earlier moments in the 19th and 20th centuries when the failures of bourgeois liberalism and the advance of reactionary forces stimulated the reawakening of radical politics. To critically reflect on the history of the Left, therefore, is to see both the limitations of current movements and their potential trajectory.

The youth and the American Left in the 21st century

The resurgence of Left-wing politics in the United States is particularly striking given the country's entrenched anti-communist history. Surveys consistently show that younger Americans are more open to socialism than previous generations. According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, about 48% of adults under 30 held a positive view of socialism, in contrast to only 29% of those over 65.

Young activists are also rediscovering the classical Marxist tradition. Marxist study circles proliferate on college campuses, while works such as *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) and Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed* (1937) are reappearing on bestseller lists.

As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote in 1848, "What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable."[1] Many young Americans are beginning to perceive themselves as those "grave-diggers," charged with resisting not only capitalism in general but also its specific embodiment in the authoritarian populism of MAGA politics.

Historical precedents: The 19th century

The present turn toward Marxism among the youth bears resemblance to the rise of socialist movements in the 19th century. Following the failed revolutions of 1848, European liberalism entered a period of crisis. The bourgeoisie proved incapable of fulfilling its own democratic promises, leaving working classes disillusioned. In this context, Marx and Engels articulated a vision of proletarian emancipation that transcended the narrow horizons of liberalism.

The Paris Commune of 1871 was the most powerful symbol of working-class initiative in the 19th century. Marx praised it as "the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labor."[2] Though it was brutally suppressed, the Commune provided both a model and a warning. Its lessons were studied by Lenin in *State and Revolution* (1917), where he argued that the proletariat could not simply inherit the bourgeois state but must "smash it" and replace it with new organs of workers' power.[3]

Just as the failures of bourgeois liberal revolutions opened space for socialism in the 19th century, so too have the failures of neoliberalism in the 21st century created a vacuum that younger generations are filling with revived interest in Marxist and Trotskyist politics.

The early 20th century: The Russian Revolution and beyond

The Russian Revolution of 1917 served as a turning point in the Left's ascent to unprecedented political heights in the early 20th century. Lenin's insistence on the need for a disciplined, revolutionary party, capable of leading the proletariat to power, reshaped the Marxist tradition. As Lenin famously put it, "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement."[4]

Trotsky, meanwhile, developed his theory of permanent revolution, contending that in countries of belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie was too tied to imperialism and too cowardly to carry out the tasks of democratic transformation. The completion of the democratic revolution, he argued, "is conceivable only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, which bases itself upon the peasantry."[5]

Just as the Russian Revolution emerged from the incapacity of liberal and reformist parties to solve systemic crises, the current crisis of American liberalism may open space for revolutionary alternatives. If history does not repeat mechanically, its patterns nonetheless echo.

The mid-20th century: Trotskyism and anti-fascist struggles

The 1930s marked another decisive moment. The Great Depression devastated global capitalism, creating fertile ground for both fascism and communism. In Germany, the failure of the Social Democratic Party and the sectarianism of the Stalinized Communist Party facilitated Hitler's rise. Trotsky, in his writings on Germany, warned with prophetic urgency that "If the German proletariat does not smash fascism, fascism will smash it."[6] The tragedy of German communism illustrates the dangers of fragmentation, a warning highly relevant to today's Left. In the U.S., the Popular Front of the late 1930s brought communists into alliances with liberals and progressives, expanding their cultural and labor influence. While such alliances enabled short-term gains, they also blunted revolutionary potential, leading to the eventual marginalization of communism under McCarthyism. This tension — between reformist integration and revolutionary independence — remains alive today.

The contemporary parallel

The analogy between these historical moments and the present is not exact but instructive. In each case, the Left rose in response to the failure of liberal institutions to address systemic crises. Today, as neoliberalism collapses under the weight of inequality, climate catastrophe, and geopolitical fragmentation, young people are again turning toward radical traditions. The appeal of Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism lies precisely in their uncompromising analysis of capitalism's contradictions and their insistence on working-class agency.

Opponents argue that the Left is too fragmented, marginal, or tied to historical defeats. Yet history suggests otherwise. Periods of apparent weakness have often preceded great surges of revolutionary activity. The crisis of 1848 produced the First International; the devastation of World War I produced the Russian Revolution; the despair of the Depression produced powerful anti-fascist movements. In each case, the Left rose to meet the challenge, though not without errors and tragedies.

The question is whether today's radicalizing youth will develop the organizational forms capable of transcending sectarian divisions. If history is a guide, unity in struggle — not abstract agreement — will be decisive. The recognition that the MAGA movement represents not simply an electoral phenomenon but a crystallization of capitalist reaction may provide the impetus for such unity.

The renewed interest in Marxism, Leninism, and Trotskyism among American youth should not be dismissed as a passing fad. Rather, it reflects deeper structural contradictions within global capitalism and the inability of liberal politics to resolve them. History demonstrates that the Left has repeatedly revived itself in moments of profound crisis, often when least expected. While today's movements remain fragmented, the potential for growth is significant. The task is to learn from the lessons of the past — not to repeat its failures but to seize its possibilities.

As Marx observed in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), history repeats itself "the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."[7] The challenge for the contemporary Left is to ensure that its revival is neither tragedy nor farce but the beginning of a new revolutionary epoch. **|P**

[1] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 34.

[2] Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (New York: International Publishers, 1993), 74.

[3] V. I. Lenin, *State and Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1992), 77.

[4] V. I. Lenin, "Dogmatism and 'Freedom of Criticism,'" in *What Is To Be Done?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1973), 25.

[5] Leon Trotsky, "What is the Permanent Revolution? Basic Postulates," in *The Permanent Revolution* (1930), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1931/tpr/pr10.htm>.

[6] Leon Trotsky, *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1971), 112.

[7] Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 15.

"Democracy and the Left," continued from page 2

GS: I'd like to stay, but I have to watch this debate.[25] I agree with everything said — it was the democratic will that crushed communists and homosexuals. Democracy can do anything. It doesn't inherently do things that are universally beneficial. That's why it's so scary. That's why you have constitutions: to make sure it doesn't fuck itself over or do crazy stuff. I guess the idea is to help people do less crazy stuff.

The red thread here is a concern with the formalization of democracy — bureaucracy, institutions, and elites. But Stalinist bureaucracy, the welfare state, and the two-party system didn't directly follow the American Revolution. How would you draw the line regarding where democracy soured?

S: U.S. democracy for most of its life was working as intended: as a brutal system of class rule. From the perspective of capitalists today, it went wrong with people like Trump and those like him around the world. Because there's no way to offer any meaningful change without disrupting the capitalist system; all you can offer is demagoguery. Empty promises end up infinitely more popular than "nothing will fundamentally change." Whoever wins this election, we will see more attacks on the working class, more crackdowns on protests. Either party will do this because both of them represent the ruling class. We're going to see more strikes, more class struggles, as life continues to be hard and people try to demand better conditions. The working class, the striking workers, have no party of their own. That needs to be built. When these struggles come, the RCA will be there, supporting the working class, and putting forward Marxist perspectives for the future as well as tactics needed to be successful in these movements.

GW: The way that the American state projected itself as above any partisan nature ended around the Cold War, when communism was accused for the first time, by the President, of being a criminal conspiracy.[26] Thereafter you have the administrative state. Formal democracy suddenly gives birth to these agencies: the Department of Homeland Security,[27] the FBI, the OSS,[28] and then the CIA. Much of the New Left is a CIA product of the Congress of Cultural Freedom.[29] The U.S. government was so spooked that the Left had garnered the support of America's intelligentsia (Langston Hughes, for example) that they decided to bankroll artists like Jackson Pollock — and Adorno and Horkheimer, who had valuable things to say. The government tried to articulate a synthetic Left that could be against the Soviet Union — against Actually Existing Socialism — but wouldn't pose an actual threat: endless critical theory that diverts the working class away from its own goals.

If we are Marxists, we have to revisit what it means to struggle for socialism in the U.S., which means building an independent working-class power, not wedded to the Democrats or Republicans, to build and raise dual power to the level of political authority. Only a communist party has historically been able to do that. We can talk about the failures of 20th-century socialism, but the fact remains that only those Bolshevik-style parties had any success: the ones that could challenge global capitalism in a world-historical way. It continues to do that. China today — one can simply say they've reverted to capitalism, but this is a misguided notion.

S: That's precisely what happened.

GW: If you don't want to accept that China is socialist, at least accept that it freaks the hell out of the Wall Street elites in this country. That should show there's some legacy of Bolshevism that remains relevant to people in the 21st century.

AG: Bourgeois democracy and bourgeois power is nothing more than bits and pieces of feudal power. The bourgeois revolutionary criticism first eroded aristocratic authority, then trampled it down and smashed it to pieces. But this demolition job was never carried to its logical conclusion, namely, the abolition of class power. Once the weightiness of myth and belief in authority were gone, the only forms of government left were burlesque terror and idiot democracy. When we think about politics in terms of what our groups provide in leading the working class, or having discussions amongst Leftist intellectuals, we're actually moving farther away from not only politics but power. The CIA doesn't have to fund a psyop to convince people that communism sucks, because the Soviet Union, China, and Leftist sects are doing that well on their own. When I think about democracy in power, I think about the mutual aid groups I'm a part of. They're not powerful, but people like them, people get fed by them, and they operate together well, because they're operating for a goal, for a common purpose. The Left groups I'm a part of are disorganized, pie-in-the-sky, and resentful. They don't like each other. They don't really like the working class; they think the working class is stupid. Maybe I'm just unlucky and haven't found the right group yet, but that's my experience. **|P**

Transcribed and edited by Benjamin Katz, Clay Mills, and Allen You

[1] Founded in 1992 by Ted Grant as the Committee for a Marxist International. It was renamed to the International Marxist Tendency (IMT) in 2004. In 2024, the IMT re-established itself as the Revolutionary Communist International, the Revolutionary Communists of America being its American section.

[2] The Infrared Collective was one of two organizations which jointly founded the American Communist Party (ACP) in 2024, the other being the Midwestern Marx Institute. Infrared was originally established as the YouTube channel of political commentator Haz Al-Din. See Ben B. and Clint M., "'The epoch of empires': An interview with Haz Al-Din," *Platypus Review* 163 (February 2024), <https://platypus1917.org/2024/02/01/the-epoch-of-empires-an-interview-with-haz-al-din>.

[3] Video of the panel is available at <https://youtu.be/bQxb86UTmCo>.

[4] See Karl Marx, "The Paris Commune," in *The Civil War in France* (1871): "Instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people, constituted in Communes, as individual suffrage serves every other employer in the search for the workmen and managers in his business."

[5] Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany).

[6] "American exceptionalism" was coined by Joseph Stalin in the late 1920s, pejoratively referring to American Communist Jay Lovestone's position that revolution was not imminent in the United States due to a variety of nationally-specific factors.

[7] See Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."

[8] Vice President Hubert Humphrey was the Democratic candidate in the 1968 U.S. Presidential election. A vocal proponent of the Vietnam War, his nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago was accompanied by popular protests and riots across the city.

[9] Grayson Walker's opening remarks were published in an expanded form as "Marxism and democracy," *Platypus Review* 174 (March 2025), <https://platypus1917.org/2025/03/01/marxism-and-democracy/>.

[10] Joseph Stalin, "Speech of the 19th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" (October 14, 1952), in *Works*, vol. 6 (London: Red Star Press Ltd., 1986), <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1952/10/14.htm>: "Earlier, the bourgeoisie presented themselves as liberal, they were for bourgeois democratic freedom and in that way gained popularity with the people. Now there is not one remaining trace of liberalism."

[11] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Idealism and Materialism," in *The German Ideology* (1845–46).

[12] The Party for Socialism and Liberation.

[13] See Jerry Rubin, *Do It! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 126.

[14] See W.E.B. Du Bois, "The General Strike," in *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Party Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (1935).

[15] See CrimethInc., "Dropping Out: A Revolutionary Vindication of Refusal, Marginality, and Subculture," *Rolling Thunder* 2 (Winter 2006): 12–23, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/crimethinc-dropping-out>.

[16] Protests began on May 26, 2020. The police station was set on fire on May 28. See Gabe Gutierrez, David K. Li, and Dennis Romero, "Minneapolis police precinct burns as protests rage on after death of George Floyd," *CNBC* (May 29, 2020), <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/05/29/minneapolis-police-precinct-on-fire-amid-protests-after-george-floyds-death.html>.

[17] Woods and Grant co-wrote the book *Reason In Revolt: Dialectical Philosophy and Modern Science* (1995), arguing that the Big Bang theory was unscientific and contrary to dialectical materialism.

[18] This apocryphal quote is typically attributed to Zhou Enlai. When Kissinger asked him in 1971 about the legacy of the 1789 French Revolution and the 1871 Paris Commune, Zhou allegedly mistook him to be referencing the recent May 1968 riots in France.

[19] See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Proletarians and Communists," in *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch02.htm>: "We have seen above, that the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class to win the battle of democracy."

[Endnotes 20–29 available online]

"Bernie Sanders," continued from page 3

his throat, condemning Washington's latest offense on human dignity, and resident goofball Felix Biederman, who would follow up with a joke about cum.

To maintain this balance, Frost's righteous indignation is in perpetual wobble mode, allowing her to speak at one moment like Jimmy Stewart's character in *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), who brings naïve idealism and righteous fury to a Senate floor rigged against him; at the next, she turns and winks at the camera Frank Underwood-style.[24] While these two qualities are core to *Chapo*'s style and define the appeal of the show, they also betray the show's conditions of possibility: a showcase of the Left's inability to do anything but yell at the TV. In this way, what appears new about *Chapo* is actually old. Its lack of inhibition is all *Mad Magazine* and Lester Bangs, its hyperfactoidalism that of *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) and Oliver Stone. In all, it distills 50 years of the "Left's" existence during which it has been nothing without the Democrats, and so has needed the Democrats to remind itself why it exists.

If George McGovern, evoked at the start of Dirtbag, stands in for Bernie Sanders, Frost fashions herself after Hunter S. Thompson, the woozy, bleary-eyed intellectual for whom no adversary in a bar fight can be socked squarely in the jaw until viewed up close. As obvious as certain parallels appear — i.e., Thompson was "new journalism," whereas *Chapo* is "new media"; Thompson found himself reporting on an insurgent presidential candidate, and so did Frost— the rhyme of Thompson's moment in 1972 with Frost's in 2020 makes intuitive sense precisely because of that which Frost disavows: the historical repetition of failure.

This recalls an implicit philosophy of history shared among the *Chapo* hosts. Matt Christman, for instance, has expressed pessimism about the meaning of the present, claiming that whereas previous periods of upheaval contained "hinge points" — instances where contingent events allowed for decisive action in shaping world history — the current phase of capitalism "has essentially overridden the traditional prerogatives of human agency."[25] This agrees with one of Frost's presuppositions; that politics is fundamentally shaped by objective "material conditions." For her, it really is the "economy, stupid."[26] Insofar as agency exists, as she imagines it — recalling, for instance, her Alinsky-esque[27] invocation of socialism as an eternal struggle between the haves and the have-nots — its use is not a moral question, but a pragmatic matter of weathering greater forces. By attempting to become aware of one's conditions, one can, at least, avoid being scammed. The concern is pragmatic: instead of politics, there are policies. Instead of hair-splitting sects, there are candidates who "get things done." And instead of critics, there are "accessible," witty writers.

Thus, no matter how Frost's book attempts to overlook the failed causes with which she is associated — and which made her a micro-celebrity on the Left — traces of their politics cling to the writing itself, which is stylistically preoccupied with means over ends. Frost's hasty generalizations, stacked as they are upon cherry-picked evidence and ad hominems, are only satisfying in the same way as an overstimulated teenager is drawn to Hunter S. Thompson not for his commentary but his drug stories. Whatever her intention, the book's strained attempts at cultural criticism frequently come off as cultural conservatism, quite neatly encapsulating the Left's ongoing retreat into the Right.

A chore to be done

Bernie Sanders is the reason anyone picks up Frost's book today. Had Sanders won the presidency in 2020, she would have been able to say that her podcast played a part. So, for her to freeze the image of the Sanders campaign in its birth, without also remembering its death, does not preserve her claim to relevance, as she intends, but nullifies it. History has no meaning if it is presumed to have passed. And here is the Millennial Left's legacy, living in an empty present, unable to recall what the future looked like for the past. Yet, perhaps this is *Dirtbag*'s most revealing truth. Frost leaves unspoken her ambivalence regarding her generation's limited horizons. If her avoidances are disingenuous, her book amounts to a genuine artefact of a moment built out of missed reckonings. However fitting her metaphor of *Moby-Dick*'s Starbuck, stoically sailing on against all odds in a raging sea, it is a lonely, solipsistic vision to live by. She could have, instead, heeded her own words: "To wash your hands of your responsibility to be older and wiser is to send [young people] into war alone, unprepared, without even warning them about the one thing you're most familiar with: failure." **|P**

[1] See "Chapo Trap House," *Graphtreon*, <https://graphtreon.com/creator/chapotraphouse>.

[2] Frost's tenure as an activist began in Indiana in the 2000s. She went on to participate in activism for Planned Parenthood, WFP, and DSA, also attending strike solidarity actions, anti-eviction demonstrations, anti-Tea Party events, and tabling Young Democratic Socialists events.

[3] Amber A'Lee Frost, "It's Bernie, Bitch," *The Baffler* (January 11, 2019), <https://thebaffler.com/all-tomorrows-parties/its-bernie-bitch-frost>. *The Baffler* has since retracted the article, leaving an editor's note: "We have removed the January 11, 2019, column by Amber Frost from our website after determining that it does not meet *The Baffler*'s guidelines for coverage and commentary concerning political candidates. The essay is an expression of Ms. Frost's personal views. While *The Baffler* supports a robust discussion about political issues and candidates, as a nonprofit organization it does not support or oppose any individual candidate or potential candidate for political office. We are sorry for any inconvenience to our readers."

[4] [Spanish] Social outburst. This was a series of massive protests in Chile in 2019–21.

[5] [Endnote 5 available online]

[6] Hunter S. Thompson, "September," in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2022), 389.

[7] "Memento Bernie," *Chapo Trap House* (April 13, 2020), <https://soundcloud.com/chapo-trap-house/410-memento-bernie-41320>.

[Endnotes 7–27 available online]

elevated to statehood at the expense of the official democratic forms of the Constituent Assembly.

Many Left-Communists — not to strawman you, Andy, but anarchists especially — deride Marxists for leaving the state alive. For Marxism, the disappearance of the state is not willed by any actor; the state disappears in the sense of overflowing productive forces outstripping the form of the state which relies on the coercive mechanism, or even deliberative mechanisms like democracy. Democracy at its fullest extent is equivalent to the abolition of the state form.

Andy Gittlitz: Feel free to strawman me; I'll try to do my best to strawman myself. Marx defined communism as "the real movement which abolishes the present state of things."[11] The purpose of the organized Left, to which the majority of sects are oblivious, is to recognize and record this movement, providing it with the strategic data to intervene, collaborate, and achieve higher levels of collective power. Representative democracy triumphs with social atomization: it is the limited power of the greatest number, and the fuller power of the greatest limited number.

As a result, the great ideologies soon abandon faith for numbers. Nowadays the American nation is no more than a few thousand war veterans. What Marx and Engels used to call "our party" is today in the wildest dreams of the DSA, PSL,[12] RCA, and ACP: a few million voters and a couple thousand militants. This is the so-called "mass party." Ideology draws its essence from quantity: Pavlovian conditioning. Madison Avenue got Americans in the 1950s to salivate when they heard the word communism. They say, "the proletariat has a raw deal, but the communists are using black liberation, queer liberation, feminism, environmentalism, wildcat strikes, and the anti-war movement as a front, so we have to stop them." But then, a wonderful thing happened. Children were born who get no bad vibes when we hear the word "intifada." We get sexually aroused by the word "revolution." We get high on socialism, and we puke at the sounds of Harris and Trump.

When we think of mass politics today, we think of demonstrations. I never know what the "issues" are at demonstrations; they're decided by people who like to go to meetings. All we should want from those meetings are demands that the establishment can never satisfy. What a defeat if they satisfy our demands! Demonstrators are never "reasonable." We always put our demands forward in such an obnoxious manner that the power structure can never satisfy us and remain the power structure. Then we scream, righteously angry, when our demands are not met. Satisfy our demands and we lose. Deny our demands, and, through struggle, we achieve the love and brotherhood of a community. At the earliest stages of proletarian rupture, goals are irrelevant compared to tactics and actions. People are always asking me, what's your program? I hand them a Mets scorecard, or I tell them to check the yellow pages. "Our program's there." Fuck programs. The goal of revolution is to abolish programs and turn spectators into actors. It's a do-it-yourself revolution, and we'll work out the future as we go. Castro said, "The goal of the Cuban revolution is to turn every individual into a legislator."[13] Representative democracy is the enemy.

What the Leninists, with their conversion of Marxism into a natural science, fail to understand is that language does not radicalize people. What changes people is the emotional involvement of action, the creation of new situations which previous mental pictures did not explain. The movement is a school, and its teachers are TikTokers, streamers, podcasters, bloggers, ravers, rebellious athletes and pop stars, and the students fighting cops at sit-ins, occupations, and in courtrooms.

Let us take a brief moment to remember the spirit of May 28, 2020: the burning police precinct in Minneapolis — the signal to the U.S. proletariat that the state was vulnerable to attack — and the millions who immediately leapt to loot, burn, and party in the streets. Let's remember Trump hiding in a bunker, and Democratic politicians and cops alike kneeling in supplication to a mass working-class party. What vanguard party initiated this mass insurrection, the largest in American history since the general strike of slaves that freed themselves at the end of the Civil War?[14] It was not the DSA, PSL, anarchists, or some Discord server posing as a new communist party; it was friends and neighbors of George Floyd, who went to his killer's workplace and burnt it to the ground.

Previous revolutions aimed at the seizure of state authority, followed by the takeover of the means of production. The youth international revolution will begin the mass breakdown of authority, mass rebellion, total anarchy in every institution in the Western world. Tribes of zoomers, lumpen, armed women, workers, peasants, and students will take over. The CrimethInc dropout myth[15] will infiltrate every structure in America. The revolution will shock itself by discovering that it has friends everywhere, just waiting for the moment. There will be no more jails, courts, or police. The world will become one big commune with free food and housing, everything shared. People will farm in the morning, make music in the afternoon, and fuck wherever and whenever they want to. At community meetings all across the land, Timothée Chalamet's rendition of Bob Dylan will replace the National Anthem.

Responses

S: It is correct that language does not radicalize people — it's material conditions that do. If you ask people who identify as socialists or communists what radicalized them, the most common answer is "everything." It's wrong to overfetishize spontaneity. A revolutionary movement — when the masses take history into their own hands and go into the streets — will not be called by any party. With Black Lives Matter, we see the problems of a purely spontaneous movement. One of the biggest attacks made on the movement was the looting. The people looting weren't the movement, but people who took advantage of the chaos. We can't have a disorganized struggle for power.

The most common result of a revolution is defeat. A revolutionary situation is not going to last forever. A party needs to be built in advance, having earned the trust of the working class in advance, and be able to make a successful revolution out of that. The point of studying theory is that we learn the lessons of history, so that we're not going blindly into future struggles.

GS: Where I diverge has to do with what all of you call "bourgeois democracy." I would call it rule by men and whites. "Bourgeois" does not capture the nature of the aristocracy, nor of the oligarchy that has ruled the country. Rather than "class struggle," I'm inclined to say "democratic struggle." The demand for equality includes addressing issues of economic inequality, but that doesn't get at the range of hierarchy, injury, and suffering that people experience.

Since World War II, there has been a deep state, a national security state, invested in what I call "counter-subversion." It names people and practices — queer sex, communists, interracial couples, blacks simply living — and it counters what it calls "subversion" in the name of protecting something like true Americanism or democracy. The Left asks itself if it can inflect, take over, or modify these institutions. There are two answers. One says, "if you get involved, you end up ineffective," and then you will criticize Ocasio-Cortez for not being the standard-bearer that we had hoped for. The other argument is, build a parallel universe: black, front-line communities, labor unions, churches — alternative institutions to the dominant society. We need to be open to both.

I stopped being a Marxist when I concluded that there's no such thing as "material conditions," that "material" is only produced by splitting it off from culture. There is no such thing as a "material condition" without language — no access to reality. We live through our imagination of reality as we make reality. Language is what shapes and directs people. American public opinion radically changed for the first time since the nation's founding after George Floyd was killed. 70% of whites said there was systematic racism; the usual number is 25–30%. The burning of the police station returned all those numbers to their usual ratio.

AG: That happened first. That was the first moment of the uprising.

GS: I would say it was the end of it.

AG: That makes no sense. It was the first day.[16]

GW: Democracy is being treated abstractly. The point is that proletarian dictatorship is different. It doesn't come at the expense of democratic forms but is a supplement, in the same way that we say bourgeois democracy belies a dictatorship by a definite class. We should support the democratic struggle, but that means fighting on behalf of those forces which are also trying to preserve the basic breathing room afforded by the Constitution for a socialistic substance. In actually-existing socialism today, the People's Republic of China's party dictatorship does not exist at the expense of the state government; they are parallel structures. But they are different because communist and socialist politics exists as an answer to the inadequacy of bourgeois formalism.

GS: Are you defending the Chinese state?

GW: Yes. The Chinese state represents a form beyond liberal democracy. I would agree that we're at an interregnum, but the disappearance is of the inadequate, bourgeois, liberal-democratic form, crushed under the weight of dictatorship by finance capital. The goal of socialists is to defend this breathing room while at the same time building dual power, which is why I disagree with Andy's rejection of the party form.

AG: The party forms that we have on the panel, yeah.

GW: My agreement with the Left communists is that the party form needs to be adapted to the digital age, but not at the expense of the traditional, tried-and-tested means of proletarian organization. The class struggle isn't something that Marxists dream up. The party is just a name for the advanced guard of the class-conscious proletariat. The party-form should not be viewed as being at the expense of forms of spontaneity; it was only the Bolsheviks that raised soviet democracy to statehood.

GS: And then crushed the Soviets.

GW: No, they did not. It was the reactionaries who stood against the Soviets, for the Constituent Assembly, for the continuation of the war, for the continuation of landless peasantry.

AG: The tried-and-tested Leninist form failed. In 1917 there was the Winter, or February, Revolution — that was spontaneous — and then there was a counterrevolution. Professor Shulman, I agree with almost everything you have to say.

I have to defend the slander that looters weren't part of the uprising. The same people that burnt down the precinct — the initiator of the nationwide uprising — were also looting the Target across the street. But those resources were pooled outside in the parking lot and distributed freely. That looting became the structure of the mutual-aid network in Minneapolis that still exists today. I saw someone rob a bar and pass out cash from the register. These were not opportunist looters. It's disturbing that the vanguard of the proletariat doesn't know what happened in the largest proletarian uprising of our lifetimes.

In its transformation from the International Marxist Tendency to the RCA, the most important part of their program has been lost in the move. Democracy was not created in a single enlightened burst around 1776, just as there was no Big Bang that created the universe. The great IMT theorist Alan Woods understood the thoroughly anti-dialectical misapprehension of a determined universe expanding and contracting based on natural laws.[17] The Big Bang was only one cosmic event among many, whose results, to paraphrase Deng Xiaoping on the French Revolution, are too early to appraise.[18] Proletarian democracy is as ontological as the human metabolic system; reality is created moment to moment, generalized in mass ruptures, whose pretext and context are, contrary to Marx, often by our choosing. So I call on the RCA to continue the noble work of the IMT. I skimmed their newspaper, and I didn't see anything about the Big Bang lie and the profound significance of this point.

Q&A

What should a Leftist today learn from 1917? What is the relationship of the dictatorship of the proletariat to what Marx would have called "the battle of democracy?"[19]

S: I want to argue against what was said about the February Revolution. First, you have a spontaneous revolution that overthrows the Tsar and puts in place a Constituent Assembly: a democratic system immediately dominated by the liberals, defending capitalism, not able to fix the economy, to end World War I, to address any of the peasant's problems. The October Revolution was not a counterrevolution. The Soviets sprung up organically in the struggle, developed out of general-strike committees. These were institutions of workers' democracy; I need to argue against both the ACP and the professor on this.

Workers' democracy was not crushed in Russia when the Bolsheviks came to power. Russia was an isolated country that was highly underdeveloped. The basic condition for socialism is superabundance, but Russia was a country that faced poverty, especially after and during WWI. The way Trotsky describes it is, if there's not enough to go around, lines begin to form and a policeman is needed to maintain order.[20] Stalin represented the bureaucracy as it consolidated itself and became more conscious of its privileges and aims — this was where Soviet democracy was crushed. This is different from the situation today; few countries are as backward as Russia was in 1917.

Can we chalk up the failure of 1917 to the objective backwardness of Russia? Don't we have to account for the failure of the Revolution to spread around the world?

S: The revolution did spread: two revolutions in Germany, a Hungarian revolution, a mass movement in Italy — later crushed by fascism. It's not just technology. What is needed is a party, like the Bolsheviks, of revolutionaries, prepared in advance, who have studied the history of past revolutions, who know what to expect to the degree that it's possible.

GS: Do we want to spend our remaining time talking about the Russian Revolution?

GW: It's a big deal. If the Bolsheviks were not successful, Marxism would've been consigned to some footnote of history. The Bolsheviks incriminated what was previously a matter of ideologists and theoreticians — and a successful social-democratic party, but that could not exhaust the limits of liberal democracy (of the West, actually) in its *logos*.[21] What 1917 teaches us is that we are not Mensheviks if we are communists. We cannot restrict the form of democracy to the bourgeois-democratic form. The dictatorship of the proletariat is the party dictatorship — it's synonymous. It was the proletarian dictatorship of 1917 that elevated the working class's own spontaneously developed organs of class rule to the level of supreme state power. The Bolshevik Revolution didn't fail. It's clear that the spark lit by Lenin in 1917 has continued to animate not only 1.5 billion people in China, but an entirely new historical index that brought the capitalist world to its knees.

GS: I was part of what was called the New Left. The New Left called itself "new" because it rejected how you guys talk. It rejected a certain kind of Marxism with a teleological history and an implicit or avowed authoritarianism, disguised in the name of the people. The New Left wanted to capture the energy of the soviets through the idea of participatory democracy, but without the party form. Listening to you guys talk about Russia, saying its revolution was a success given the gulags that it or China created — honestly, I find it shocking. I realize there's some need to resurrect this stuff; I'm not sure what the need is. It seems to me that it distracts us from engaging our actual circumstances. Contrary to what you said, Marxism or different Left approaches survived despite the Soviet Union, not because of it. A Marxist party claiming knowledge of reality to instruct the benighted masses in what's good for them is a catastrophe. The party form, in its Leninist form, is inevitably Stalinist. [GW nods.] You need political forms that are more consistently participatory. That's why I emphasize the democratic now and not the Marxist.

AG: As a member of the new New Left, I largely agree. People are not ignorant. They know that Actually Existing Socialism is the totalitarian dictatorship of the bureaucracy: a new ruling class, a new deep state. Instead of dwelling on this laughable parody of Leninist, Maoist, and Stalinist sects disguising themselves as proletarians or populist vanguards, we have to realize that we get our understanding of what Marx meant by the dictatorship of the proletariat from the unorganized workers that disguised themselves as students and lumpens to make the greatest contribution to class struggle in 150 years. He was referring to the Paris Commune. If we want to look at Marx and not pretend that Stalin and Lenin were writing as Marx under a pen name, that's the basis of proletarian democracy and proletarian dictatorship.

You are all small-d democrats—

GW: I'm not a "small-d." Public record.

AG: I'm a member of the Democratic Party.

Small-d democrats presuppose a certain revolutionary consciousness of the people that are going to exercise power. Does the working class's exercise of democratic political power necessarily lead to socialism? Why did socialists think that the working class was the revolutionary subject of history?

GS: There isn't any necessary relationship between people who work and socialism, which Lenin saw. Lenin said, unless there's a party, people will be stuck; i.e., unless there's a politics and a narrative, they will be stuck.

AG: The proletariat is the class that seeks to abolish itself in class society. That's what revolution means. Although I support working-class struggle, the AFL-CIO or a bread-and-butter working-class demand is not in itself revolutionary.

GW: Marx himself talks about the class which is unable to even be a class. It doesn't have a class interest like the bourgeoisie does, only a general interest in overthrowing the existing state of affairs. But that isn't something that communists have to dream up for them. The working class articulates that organically — but not always in a revolutionary way. The task of communists is to go down to the people.

AG: Down. You have to go down because you're up.

GW: We are engaging as students at NYU. We are intellectuals. We have to return to the basic Maoist slogan of "practice, theory, practice."[22] If it doesn't meet the actual expectations of people, if it doesn't give form to their grievances, it must be rethought. The rejection of any mediated form of working-class politics is just a rejection of working-class politics. The role for communists is to have a party that represents working-class interests; that's only defined by being a working-class faction in politics. Yes, that does mean being incriminated in reality.

What have the eight years since 2016 told you about democracy? Also, I was surprised that all of you were critical of the Constitution aside from Grayson.

GS: The Constitution is Janus-faced. It is a minoritarian document; it protects minorities. Having something more democratic in this country would require completely rewriting the Constitution — not the Bill of Rights. The last eight years have been terrifying. The fact that we live in a country with 48% of the population voting for Donald Trump is a scary thing.

GW: Trump is not our guy. At the same time, I don't see how the Democratic Party is preferable to what Trump represents. The duty of communists is to preserve the integrity of the state form that gives us the right to organize. It means resurrecting the Popular Front. But we have to understand what that strategy meant in the 19 —

GS: How are you going to vote in November? Are you going to vote?

GW: No. Absolutely not. — Popular Front, the Comintern's policy, meant allying with forces preserving democracy against fascist threat.[23] In the U.S. today, this doesn't take the form of allying with the Democratic Party —

GS: Even Stalin said that they should ally with the liberals, the Constitutional Democrats, and the Republicans, and you're not going to do it?

GW: The difference is that the Popular Front in Spain was organic. It was on the basis of democratic forces.

GS: There is a popular democracy in this country. A multiracial democracy has, with great difficulty, emerged at popular levels. The Democratic Party is not a great vehicle, but if it gets crushed now, that's a big deal. Your popular front — that's been happening for the last 40 years. It can be crushed by a regime that closes down the spaces that enable that organizing.

GW: The Democratic Party is at war with people's basic ability to organize, to speak freely. It's drumming up a war and aggression against China and Russia. It is increasingly the preeminent party of fascism in America. The Republicans are just controlled opposition. Both parties are subservient to a banking class which is speaking through them. We are on the side of bourgeois freedoms.

GS: No, you're not. I can't believe I have to defend it — I've spent my whole life hating the Democratic Party — but they are the ones who are defending voting rights, they are the ones who are defending abortion —

S: They did a great job with that.

GS: Do I sound deluded? They are not defending it the way I would, but, relatively speaking, they are defending it more. You're young and absolutist, but all of politics is in the margins. Make a note to yourself — 40 years from now, I want you to look back like I look back on voting for McCarthy rather than Humphrey.[24] Make a note to yourself about the historical significance of not voting this November. It will be staggering.

S: You don't need a fascist dictatorship to get clubbed by riot police. And it's wrong to characterize Trump as some kind of unique threat. Trump is another figure representing the ruling class, but also a symptom of the failure of the center to offer anything to society. Trump can only exist because he's able to falsely present himself as anti-establishment.

GS: But meanwhile, what are you going to do?

S: The anger in society is not going away. If something on the Left is not built, the Right will continue to absorb that anger, whether or not Trump wins this election. To simply back the Democrats now is at best postponing Trump, and it is not a guarantee that any rights are protected. Look at what happened with abortion rights under the Democrats: they used this as an election issue for decades, refusing to make a serious attempt to codify it. If we seriously want to defend the marginalized sections of the working class, what is needed is an alternative for the working class to either party.

GS: Between now and November.

S: The question is longer-term than "between now and November." We are going to keep returning to the debate, every election, until an alternative is built.

Trump is unique. He's transformed politics. The world around us is being remade through democracy. The Left is going to have little to do with how democracy is remaking the world. This panel was trying to pose how capitalism is recreated through democracy, and what it means that democracy can demand authoritarianism. How should Marxists or intellectuals on the Left critically engage with that phenomenon?

AG: Bonapartist-type figures emerge from this electoral process, and then, once in power, they're largely checked by the system they claim to be against. I'm not saying that Trump in all his absurdity isn't lethal; I'm saying that the stupidity of power is deadlier than stupidity in power.

To answer the pressing question about what to do in November, I'm going to vote for the candidate who is in favor of expanding the Supreme Court, locking up the fascists who tried to overthrow democracy in 2020, and labor unions: Joe Biden. I encourage everyone here to do the same. He was unfairly removed in a coup by Kamala Harris and the globalists that she represents.

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